



# Safeguards North Wild R

By Ron Wilson

*James Myhre, game warden for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, surveys his district in Kidder County. Like other Department wardens, Myhre is responsible for about 2,500 square miles.*

*It's early enough in the morning that a guy is still working on his first cup of coffee and isn't even thinking about lunch yet, and the cell phone sounds from the front seat of the pickup. To the pedestrian riding shotgun, the sound is startling. The darn thing has a ring loud enough to rattle teeth. Or, more importantly, loud enough to alert its owner who at anytime could be standing yards away on a hilltop with binoculars.*

# Warding Dakota's Resources



of paper that is running short on space. His notes include license plate numbers, vehicle descriptions, names, map coordinates and other jottings that mean something to him, but little to his passenger. He tells callers that he'll look into their complaints, do the best he can, which is sometimes easier said than done, considering Myhre is responsible for all of Kidder County and parts of western Stutsman County.

"We are probably the smallest force in the United States, yet we are highly effective in what we do," said Ray Goetz, Department enforcement division chief. The Department has 33 game wardens, with each responsible, on average, for about 2,500 square miles.

That's a lot of country to cover, even for the warden not getting pulled in different directions. "By this time on the opener, I already had 15 calls," Myhre said. "There was plenty going on."

Myhre, according to his notes, will be on the lookout for a hunter who reportedly is driving off-trail when and where he shouldn't. The landowner who made the complaint said he didn't want to raise a stink, but was growing tired of the guy creating trails in the snow where they shouldn't be, and having other vehicles follow suit.

"I'll keep an eye out for him and try to spend some time in the area," Myhre said before hanging up.

Another call came from a motorist who hit a whitetail buck the night before and wanted Myhre to pick it up and give it to someone, anyone, so the meat wouldn't go to waste. "I have someone in mind," he said. "I told myself that if I had a little extra venison that I'd run it by to the guy."

It's this kind of variety – trying to catch bad guys one minute to helping the hungry the next – that has Myhre, a warden for about two years, wanting to make being a game warden a longtime career. "It's just something new every day, you're never doing the same thing twice," he said. "One day I'm roping a deer to get it out of a waste water pit, and the next day I'm checking hunters."

Note: Since rescuing the deer from the man-made pit, Myhre, who grew up around

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On this morning, seven days into North Dakota's deer season, North Dakota Game and Fish Department game warden James Myhre is handling the phone calls from Kidder County back roads that he has pretty much to himself. There are few hunters walking the brush or road hunting, which probably has more to do with timing – it's a Thursday – than, say, the weather. It's sunny, 13 degrees and climbing, and deer are moving here and there, from one piece of cover to another.

"It's a lot different out here now than on the opener," Myhre said. "There was orange everywhere you looked."

For some cell phone calls, Myhre pulls off on the nearest approach and writes on a pad

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cattle on a farm near Sheyenne, now stores the rope neatly coiled in the cab of his pickup for the next such occasion.

Being a game warden is a way of life, not just a job. It's an uncommon marriage not seen in many walks of life today, said Bruce Burkett, Department commercial investigations/undercover supervisor and game warden since 1972. "When the warden goes home after an eight-hour day, he's still on the hook," he said. "The warden buys into the feeling that he's responsible for his area, to keep bad things from happening in his area whether he's at home or not ... James is one of those guys."

Your grandpa's game warden is not your game warden today. There was a time a warden would put in 400 hours in a month. Today, wage and hour restrictions prohibit such schedules. But with the advancement of technology, cell phones being a big one, a warden today can many times get more done

in a much shorter period of time, Burkett said.

When Goetz started as a game warden in 1963 in Belfield, he went into the field without a number of things: training, gun, binoculars or uniform. "They did give me an old radio that took up about half of the trunk of my car," he said. "They also gave me an old 12-foot boat with a 10-horse motor." Problem is he'd never operated a boat before.

Things are different today. Wardens are required to have a college degree, are tested and trained before being put into the field under close supervision, and then trained some more throughout their careers. They are outfitted with the tools – spotting scopes, binoculars, cell phones, firearms, and more – necessary to do their jobs.

Myhre, for example, graduated from Dickinson State University in 2001 with degrees in biology and natural resource management. "Being a game warden is something I started thinking about doing in high school," he said. "I was told it was a hard field to get into."

To be in the field for the long-term, there has to be a balance between work and family, said Bob Timian, Department warden supervisor in Dickinson. "Most of the wardens want to work longer hours than we allow them," he said. "You'll find with wardens that when they do have the time to take their kids hunting or fishing, something we're trying to preserve for the future, that it's a real precious time for them."

Game wardens aren't the only professionals, Timian said, who find themselves working most weekends, late at night, at odd hours. He's not out to paint his peers as the hardest-working folks in North Dakota because there are so many others just like them. "Patients don't go home on the weekends so nurses can have it off," said Timian, a warden since 1985. "You'd have to think that being a game warden is a pretty good profession, though. Most of the wardens I know retire as wardens. And those who move on are still in the wildlife field."

To protect the state's natural resources from those who walk outside the law and take more than their fair share of birds, big game and fish has always been a priority. But maybe no more so than today, Burkett said.

"We are in the best of times right now in terms of resources," he said. "We have way more deer than when I started. We have

*James Myhre carries a deer decoy that, on occasion, poachers take shots at under the cover of darkness. The photo was taken before the state's deer gun season, which is why Myhre isn't wearing hunter orange while handling the decoy.*





quality elk, moose and bighorn hunting, upland populations this year are as good as I've seen them ... This is the time to manage it. The wardens have to peel off those who cheat."

Warning to cheaters: You're being watched. "I think we know the major illegal players because we are a fairly small state," Burkett said. "We may not have caught them yet, but we know who they are. Our goal is to catch them and keep others from starting illegal activities."

Sources have it that an individual in Myhre's district killed 20-plus deer last year and sold the dead animals. What the person is up to this year is only a guess, but the warden is watching. Myhre knows exactly where the individual lives, but only shares a general location, and foregoes providing a first or last name.

"That's the sort of thing that rubs a sore spot, especially if they're blatant about it," he said. "This guy is kind of a foxy feller, but I'm watching."

With daylight less than an hour old, Myhre stops his pickup to visit with a couple of deer hunters, a father and his son. They shake hands and talk about deer and the deer season. The conversation is short and ends with Myhre wishing them luck.

"Ninety-nine percent of the people I encounter are good people," he said. "But it doesn't take many to give hunters and anglers a bad name. There are some bad apples out there."

And some are sourer than others. In 2003, what has been called one of North Dakota's biggest undercover investigations finally came to a close after nearly three years. The case involved eight defendants – including a guide and outfitter and taxidermist from western North Dakota – convicted on federal and state charges of illegally killing migratory birds, concealing illegally taken game, shipping the hides and illegally taken big game animals out of state for processing, and more. Fines and restitution totaled more than \$12,000, and hunting, taxidermy and guiding and outfitting licenses for some involved were lost from two to six years.

"The end result is that the sportsmen of North Dakota won," Timian said. "It was a win for the people of our state."

Authorities in this case were initially led to wrongdoing by tips from the public. The information was gathered by Jeff Violett, a

Photo Omitted

## REPORT ALL POACHERS

You can help protect North Dakota's wildlife resources by reporting game and fish violations through the state's Report All Poachers program.

If you have knowledge of, or see a violation, call 800-472-2121 from anywhere in North Dakota 24 hours a day. Calls can also be made to any district game warden, sheriff's office or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service refuge or office.

The public's help in safeguarding the state's wildlife resources is vital. The more eyes and ears out there the better. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has one of the smallest game warden forces in the country, with each warden covering about 2,500 square miles.

RAP callers can receive monetary rewards upon convictions, which are based on the caller's information. Rewards are funded by donations received from individuals, organizations and money received from auctioning off confiscated guns, vehicles and other equipment as ordered in criminal judgments. Rewards range from \$100 to \$1,000, but not everyone claims them. Instead, the money is donated to the funding of the RAP program.

RAP callers can remain anonymous if they wish, and still receive a reward after being given a special code number and phone number to call. Callers who do speak to a game warden to provide clarification or more information can many times help with a case.

If you witness a violation, remember to write down:

- Nature of violation.
- Date and time of offense.
- Violator's name and address if known.
- Vehicle description.
- Description of violator such as age, build, clothing, other features.
- Location of violation.
- Your name, address and phone number.
- Names, addresses and phone numbers of witnesses.

game warden from Mandan. "It became apparent the traditional methods of using uniformed officers were not going to be very effective in this case," Timian said. "No matter how good the warden is, catching people like these doing something illegal is very difficult. These guys had developed their own way of avoiding detection by uniformed officers."

The undercover officers came from out-of-state, posing as nonresident hunters. Outside officers were used because it was feared that an undercover North Dakota warden would be recognized by somebody, blowing the investigation. "It's tough for any of our wardens who have been around for awhile to go

anywhere in the state and not run into someone who knows them," Timian said.

Taking nearly three years to complete the investigation seems like a long time to the novice, but it isn't, Timian said. Law enforcement officials from states where undercover operations are more common say three years is a relatively short period of time. When you commit to something like this, you want to do it right. To do it right takes time, he said.

Not all undercover operations go as planned. Sometimes the suspected bad guys aren't really bad guys after all. "Finding out that people are playing by the rules is a good thing," Timian said.

Years ago when Timian was a new warden

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*North Dakota Game and Fish Department game wardens can often be found on the water checking boaters and anglers. Bill Schaller, Department game warden from Killdeer, visits with an angler on Lake Sakakawea.*



working an undercover case, his suspect's health changed the course of the investigation. "I made the initial contacts, knew the guy had some illegal things going on, then he has this major heart attack," he said.

The public's role in safeguarding North Dakota's resources is vital. Without the cooperation of landowners, hunters, anglers, campers, hikers, or other passersby, the warden's job would be significantly more challenging. "First, you have to gain the public's trust," Goetz said. "Once you do that, the people who won't tolerate game violations will call us."

Myhre considers it part of his day when checking licenses of hunters, or visiting with ice-fishermen to see how the perch are biting, to promote the state's RAP – Report All Poachers – program. "I've got some good

cases from RAP calls," he said. "The more eyes and ears we have out there the better." To report game and fish violations, call 800-472-2121.

The eyes and ears are not always from resident landowners and sportsmen who seemingly have more of a tie to North Dakota resources because they live here. The same day Myhre had to rope the deer out of the waste water pit, he handled a call concerning five hunters from Alabama who reportedly had 32 ducks over their possession limit. The tip, provided by a hunter from Minnesota, was correct.

"When I asked those guys why they had so many ducks, they said 'Well, we needed some meat for the freezer,'" Myhre said.

Not a good answer.

With wildlife populations maybe as good overall as they've ever been in North Dakota, the state continues to attract thousands of hunters from all over the country. In turn, the number of guides and outfitters in the state has also grown. There is a place for honest guides and outfitters, Burkett said, because as society has changed, many people have lost the basic outdoor hunting skills and the services of a guide are important.

"Guides are ambassadors of our state and they need to understand that they are ambassadors," he said. "They don't need to be selling piles of ducks or stringers of fish. Instead, they need to be selling a quality outdoor experience that does include some wild game, but also a North Dakota sunrise, the feeling of the wind ..."

Burkett said Game and Fish Department wardens have a good idea who is selling what. "We're not here to write a ticket for a guy who forgot to sign his stamp, even though we have to do that sometimes," he said. "It's the other guys we're after, those who illegally impact the resource and give legitimate hunters and fishermen a bad rap."

When outlaws succeed, the sportsmen have lost and the resources have lost. "When you draw a line, no matter where you draw it, someone will be on the other side of it," Timian said.

For those who tread there in the shadows, under the cover of darkness, it's a good bet you're being watched.

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